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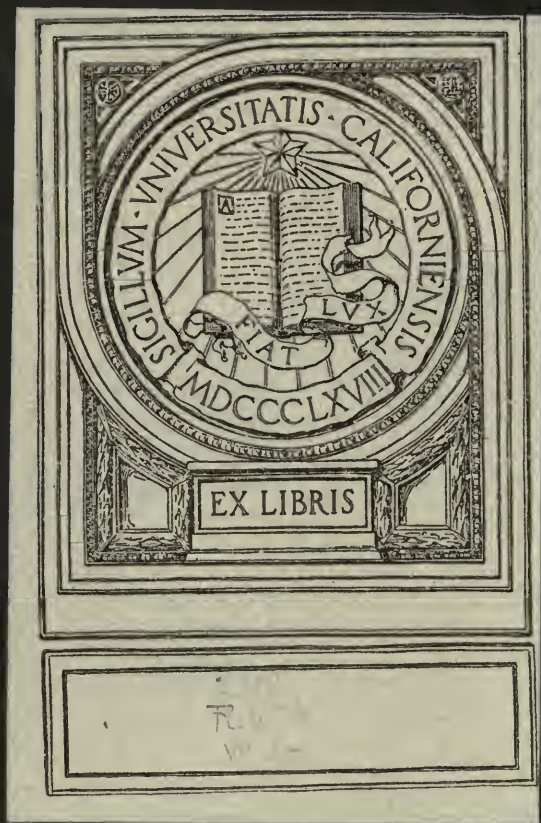
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The Rhodes Memorial at Oxford

The
Work of Cecil Rhodes

A Sonnet-Sequence

By

Theodore Watts-Dunton

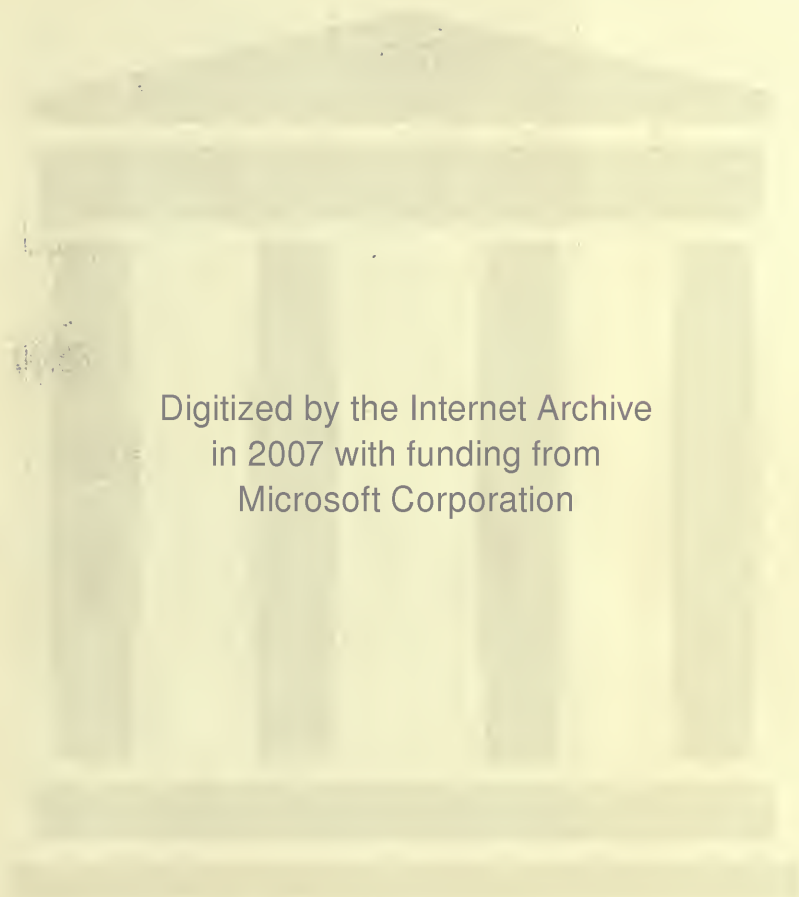
Author of

Aylwin, The Coming of Love, &c.

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THE CECIL RHODES MEMORIAL TABLET IN THE
EXAMINATION SCHOOLS AT OXFORD

The Rhodes Memorial at Oxford

The
Work of Cecil Rhodes
A Sonnet-Sequence

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The Work of Cecil Rhodes

THE impressive words of Lord Rosebery when he unveiled the Rhodes Memorial at Oxford on the 12th June, brought vividly to my mind a still more interesting and a still larger subject—the work of Cecil Rhodes. What a colossal work it was! And yet I was assured the other day that in England it seems already half-forgotten. Can that be possible? Is it really necessary to preface this sonnet-sequence by glancing at it?

Twenty-five years before he made the will whose provisions were the subject of Lord Rosebery's speech, Rhodes when he was a mere boy drew up a will in his own hand-writing which opens with these words: 'I contend that the British race is the finest that history has yet produced.' And in this belief—in the belief that it would be good for the world for the 'finest race' to dominate it—he worked during all his life.

The Work of Cecil Rhodes

If a wave of cynicism has swept over us; if enthusiasm is, nowadays, in bad form, and if it is really the fashion to laugh at the imperialist dreamer of dreams and his grandiose sepulchre on the Matoppo Hills—as I am told it is—I should like to show that in this imperialist ‘madness’ of his there was a kind of ‘method’ after all.

Just let me ask, Is there not a tremendous struggle coming on in Europe—a struggle of races—that will make all the dynastic struggles of the past seem as insignificant as any Battle of the Frogs and Mice? Must not outlets for the populations of the Old World be found, in temperate zones? And if so, where are now the new countries left to develop? Ask any intelligent German about this, and note what you get for answer, note too the way in which the answer is expressed. And yet this same German will talk of England as a ‘decadent power’. A decadent power! Well, well! Whatever may be said of England’s decadence as a physical force among the other great physical forces of Europe, her unique destiny as the great inspiring moral force of the world is becoming more and more apparent every day. And why? Because, thanks to men of the Rhodes type, she is mistress of entire continents in the temperate zone.

The Work of Cecil Rhodes

In an imaginative work of my own, I give expression to this idea. I must quote the words, for I have no time to find others.

Said my father, 'I once read in a Mohammedan poem about a certain "mighty river beyond the mountains of Káf" (whose roots, it is believed, are entirely composed of precious stones), which coloured the ocean tide into which it rolled "as with the living blood of gems".'

And he repeated certain lines from the poem, and translated them for me.

Beyond the peaks of Káf a rivulet springs,
Whose magic waters to a flood expand,
Distilling, for all drinkers on each hand,
The immortal sweets enveiled in mortal things.
From honeyed flowers—from balm of zephyr-wings,—
From fiery blood of gems, through all the land
The river draws;—then, in one rainbow-band,
Ten leagues of nectar o'er the ocean flings.

'What a beautiful idea!' I said.

'Well, in the same way, it seems to me that the features of the English race—I mean its language, its literature, and its traditions—are colouring the great tide of human life all the world over.'

I quote this because it exactly expresses Rhodes's idea.

The Work of Cecil Rhodes

With regard to the Rhodes story, let me give a succinct summary of the facts.

In the early eighties the British boundary on the north was the Orange river, at parallel 28. It was Kruger's desire—a very natural desire, from his own point of view as a Dutch patriot—to bring the territory north of this line—for through it ran the great South African trade route—under the dominion of the Vierkleur. Rhodes knew this, and he knew something more. He knew of the great German dream of absorbing not only the territory now called after Rhodes's name, but the two Dutch Republics.

In 1879 the German traveller Ernst von Weber had already proposed to Prince Bismarck to create a belt of German Empire stretching, transversely, right across the continent from German East Africa to German West Africa. In order to understand Rhodes and his scheme, it is necessary to quote the very words of this document.

‘If a European Power were to succeed in bringing these countries gradually altogether under its dominion, or at least under its political influence, a kingdom would be won thereby which in circumference as well as in wealth of its productions would not be second to the British East Indian Empire. It was this free unlimited room for annexation in the north, this open access to the heart of Africa, which

The Work of Cecil Rhodes

principally inspired me with the idea, now more than four years ago, that Germany should try, by the acquisition of Delagoa Bay, and the subsequent continual influx of German emigrants to the Transvaal, to secure the future dominion over this country, and so to pave the way for the foundation of a German-African Empire of the future.'

The Portuguese too had a similar dream.

Now what would have resulted if these schemes had not been frustrated by Rhodes's expedition northward to the point where Salisbury now stands? England's dominance in South Africa would have come to an end. I, for my part, think that the Cape itself, the keystone of the imperial arch, must eventually have been lost: that is to say, the Empire of Rhodes's 'finest race in history' would in a few years have crumbled to pieces. This consideration, even more than the fact that Rhodes's immortal expedition won for England 1,500,000 square miles in a glorious climate, was what made some of us take so passionate an interest in the work of Cecil Rhodes. And it is this which now impels me to recur to certain utterances of mine in *The Empire Review* and *The Saturday Review*, when, in 1902, Rhodes died.

The Work of Cecil Rhodes

As to Lord Rosebery's speech at the unveiling of the memorial, I must not trust myself to give full expression to my admiration of it. Some of the things he said, indeed, were so touching—they were so beautiful and so noble—that to criticize them even for praise would seem like impertinence. Never was Wordsworth's profound saying that 'What comes from the heart goes to the heart' illustrated with more power, more pathos. It is impossible to read them without feeling a tremor at the heart. If such utterances as these should not succeed in making Englishmen realize what they lost in Rhodes, nothing will, I am sure.

Recalling his conversations with Rhodes at the time when the great pioneer was misunderstood—misunderstood most grievously but most unwittingly by men incapable of wilful injustice—he gives us Rhodes's very words.

'All this does not worry me in the least. I have my will here'—as if he had it in his pocket—'I have my will here, and when they abuse me I think of it, and I know they will read it after I am gone, and will do me justice when I am dead.'

The winsome youthfulness, the almost childlike simplicity of this speech will be a revelation to many

The Work of Cecil Rhodes

a man—many an honest man—whose mental image of Rhodes was that of a mere speculator and money-grubber.

How I wish William Morris could have lived to hear these words. The only quarrels I ever used to have with him whom every one loved so dearly were concerning his angry and, as I knew, unreasonable attitude towards Rhodes.

But even this anecdote of the great chief is surpassed in beauty by the following:—

‘He had at one time a strong idea of posthumous fame. I remember arguing with him about it a long time ago. I used a stock argument; I said that fame was short, and that in the case of but very few people there was no fame to speak of, and even with them it did not last very long. I pointed to the millions of universes in the firmament, in each of which there may be millions of insects like ourselves striving for the same brief and futile hour of fame. But Rhodes would have none of it. He said: “No: I don’t agree with you at all. I have given my name to this great region of Rhodesia, and in two or three hundred years my name will still be there, and I shall be remembered after two or three centuries. What does it matter?” So that with him, even then, it was only a question of degree. The last time I saw him, when the hand of death was upon him, and when sentence of death had already probably been pronounced to him, I found him in a very

The Work of Cecil Rhodes

different mood. He said, "Well, after all, you are right; everything in this world is too short, life and fame and achievement, everything is too short"; and he gave a groan as he thought of his own career and his own ambition cut short.'

I quote this anecdote because, as the reader will perceive, the heart-thought of my sonnet-sequence is that, short as Rhodes's life was, he need not have mourned on account of its brevity; his work was not only brilliant and glorious; it was in the deep sense complete. The very brevity of his life seems to add to its pathos and its romance. His motto might have been Walter Scott's quatrain:

Sound, sound the clarion, fill the fife!

To all the sensual world proclaim,

One crowded hour of glorious life

Is worth an age without a name.

Moreover, the passage shows again the great simplicity which I always felt underlay the character of a man who was considered to be so subtle and even so double-dealing. And does it not show something else, something, to be sure, that has no reference to Rhodes, but to his eloquent friend? Does it not show that if *Natura Benigna* herself holds her greatest sons to be not even those who win battles and govern countries and do all sorts of other fine

The Work of Cecil Rhodes

things, but those few who can confront man and the universe with the widest eyes, Rhodes's friend must himself be held to stand among the 'Great Mother's' elect?

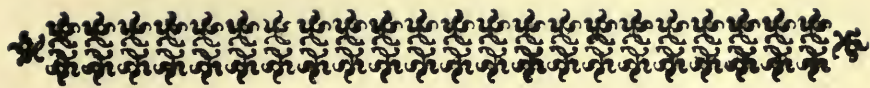
Rhodes, although he was an idealist, although he had steeped his mind in the great ideas of great writers (such as Aristotle and Marcus Aurelius), was not sufficiently a thinker to grasp the words quoted above. Goethe's saying could not be said of Rhodes, that 'thought widens but lames'. If it could, his career would have been entirely different but still entirely noble.

As far as his own welfare was concerned it would have been better for Rhodes if man's opinion had been less to him. He was sent to Africa at sixteen in order that a life threatened by consumption should be spared. It *was* spared. Africa gave him health and wealth. Rhodes bartered health for the rather thin pottage of man's opinion. The moment he began to breathe English air again he rotted away. He had to return to his foster-mother. But he returned too late. If he had never quitted the generous climate that had restored him, he would, I quite believe, have been alive now. The eight months' lonely trek in which he saw what a glorious domain could be won for the English race would have

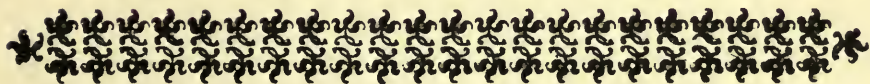
The Work of Cecil Rhodes

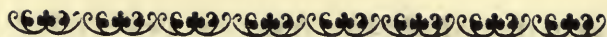
taught some men a very different kind of lesson—the lesson of the triviality of some of the things that Rhodes thought so precious. It would have taught them that he who knows man's market value in the universe is the only educated man. For it is not in a motor-car, but in an ox-wagon, moving at the rate of fifteen miles a day, that one can get all that is to be got from a trek on those lonely plains—those plains so dearly beloved by the southern constellations.

During that long trek, I say, Rhodes had a rare opportunity of knowing Nature as she lives and breathes in her own lairs far away, lonely and holy, heedless of man, ignorant of the delights of what is called civilization, listening to nothing indeed but her own wind of the veldt, seeing nothing but her own expanse of light and shade and limitless luxury of colour. And yet Rhodes pined for man's opinion. This cost him his life: but shall we greatly pity him on that account? This is the question I am asking in the following little poem.



The
Work of Cecil Rhodes





I

The Quest is the Crown

WHEN Rhodes lay dying on Pain's
remorseless bed—

When even Death's cold wings round pillow
and sheet

Wafted no coolness through the stifling
heat—

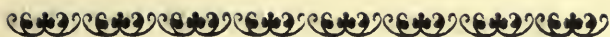
When comrades whom, in glorious days,
he led

Were stealing round the room with silent
tread,

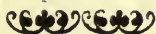
Watching how Pain could slay yet not de-
feat,—

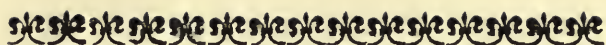
Hopeless, yet praying for Hope to come and
cheat,—

'So little done, so much to do!' he said.



No runner fails who sights a noble goal
And sinks uncrown'd. Did he, then, run in
vain
Who gave his kin that star-belov'd domain,
From Kimberley to where the waters roll,
With sunbow-coloured spray for aureole,
Adown Victoria Falls? Ah! not in vain!





II

Great Souls live long

‘SO little done,’ brave heart, ‘so much
to do’!

Since first the sun and stars looked down to
scan

The core of Nature’s phantom-pageant,
Man,

This was the cry of workers such as you;
Each strove and strove till, sudden, bright in
view,

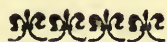
The rich fruition of the striver’s plan
Shone far away beyond Life’s narrowing
span,—

Shone while the world was waving him adieu.



Great souls live many an eon in Man's brief
years.—

To him who dreads no spite of Fate or
Chance,
Yet loves this Earth, and Man, and starry
spheres,
Life's swiftmess is the pulse of Life's
romance;
And when the footsteps fall of Death's
advance
He hears the feet: he quails not, but he hears.





III

Clive and Rhodes

‘SO much to do,’ brave heart, ‘so little
done’?

What son of England left a work more
grand?

Did that fierce trader-boy who, sword in
hand,

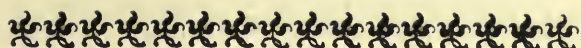
Captured the Siren Mistress of the sun

Whom only in dreams great Alexander won?—

While India, Rhodes, from Comorin’s belt
of sand

To where the guardian Kashmir mountains
stand,

Acclaims our Clive, *your* work is but begun.



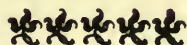
For see!—for hear!—how race is trampling race
Where'er the white man's tempered breezes
blow!—

Hear England saying, 'He won a breathing
space

For English lungs where skies of azure
glow'—

Hear Freedom saying, 'He gave me a
brooding place

Where, 'neath the flag I love, my limbs
shall grow.'





IV

The Burial in the Granite Caves

LOWER the coffin while the sunlight shed
Around this craggy platform's narrow
floor

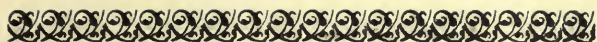
Smiles on the circle of boulders, vast and
hoar,

Kindling their lichen-mantles, yellow and
red—

Lower the coffin to its rock-hewn bed—

Cover our wreaths with this proud flag he
bore

From Orange River to the steaming shore
Where Tanganyika-waters gleam outspread.



Now, let our violets fall; he loved them
well—

He loved Old England, loved her flowers,
her grass,

Yea, in his dreams, he smelt her woodland
smell:

Now, roll the slab above him; let the
brass

On which the simple words are graven tell

Where sleeps a king whose memory shall
not pass.





V

The Spirit of Africa to Rhodes

MEN ask, 'Who shaped this mausoleum
here

Of Nature-built towers and bastioned piles,
Stretching right on for half a hundred miles,
Which symbols Rhodes, for it has no compeer?'
It symbols you, they say, great pioneer—

Save where a lonely lakelet, dimpling,
smiles

With purple bloom of lotus-lily isles—
'Because 'tis stern, imperious, strong, austere.'



They ask, 'What giant shaped these aisles of
granite,
On what wild methods of what lawless planet,
Or crazy comet's mad, enormous modes?'—
No Titan built them for a Titan race:
I carved a province for your burying-place:
Africa's yearning dreams foresaw you,
Rhodes.

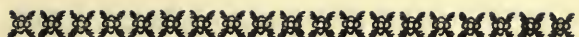




VI

The Haunted Matoppos

NATURE'S siesta deepens to a swoon.
While golden-banded lizards slumber
 bright,
Nought breaks the stillness wrapping gorge
 and height
Save yonder bark from some amazed baboon;
Or is that sound a warning note that, soon,
Your alien shade will have to meet, at
 night,
The 'Father of the Matabeles' Sprite',
Who haunts these sacred caves at rise of moon?



Is it a warning from the mighty chief¹
Whose ghost so lately held these halls in
fief
That when, to-night, he walks his burial
ground
Each Nature-carven rock, each monstrous
shape,
Will side with him, each stone-cut horse and
ape,
Each rocky lion and fox and demon hound?

¹ Umzilikazi, who was buried in the Matoppos and whose ghost still haunts the Matoppos, though his bones have been removed.



VII

Old Africa and New

SHOULD that fierce leader come who left,
they say,

‘ A cloud of vultures and a cloud of smoke ’

For trail behind him when his warriors
broke

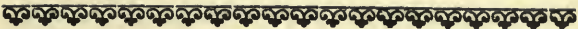
Upon the meek Mashonas, made for prey—

Should he come here to challenge this new
sway,

To fight the shade of Rhodes whose master-
stroke

Shattered the bloody Matabele yoke,

Full well we know which warrior-ghost will
stay.



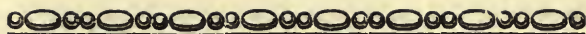
Full well we know, great captain, how will
end

The midnight battle of the rival shades.

Full well we know that, ere the moonlight
fades,

Your foe (as on that day when sole you
sate

Amid the threatening chiefs in high debate)
Will be transfigured to a spectre friend.



VIII

The Captains of the Past

BROTHER of those who, ere our England
threw

Her arms around the world, steered out to
roam,

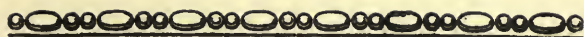
'Neath sails of Wonder, o'er the trackless
foam,

I think I see them standing there with you

At azure gates within yon sky so blue,

So pure, it seems like Heaven's own sapphire
dome—

Standing and gazing on your wondrous home
Where sleeps a hero's dust—the wild 'World's
View'.



I hear them saying,—those Captains of the
Past,—

All of Old England's hero-pedigree,
From him who drove the Spaniard from the
sea

To him who nailed his colours to the mast—

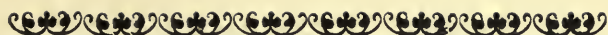
‘Pray God ye be not burying there the last
Of England's sons who keep her strong and
free!’





Notes





Sonnet IV

THE Bishop of Mashonaland officiated. About a thousand whites and a larger number of natives were present.

The whole party accompanying Mr. Rhodes's remains to their last resting-place left Fuller's Hotel this morning in one long procession, which extended through the hills and gorges for a length of five miles. It included every variety of vehicle, men on horseback, men on cycles, and many on foot—all determined to be present at the last ceremony. The scene at the last outspan was a most striking one. Here, a mile from the grave, every one dismounted, and the rest of the distance was covered on foot. It was, in fact, at this point that the funeral procession proper was formed, and no vehicles were allowed. Even with these excluded, the line of mourners was still a mile in length.

The military forming the guard of honour marched with arms reversed, and the whole moved slowly off to the strains of the Dead March in *Saul*, played by a band, the weird strains re-echoing among the hills. A detachment of Volunteers brought up the rear.

Note to Sonnet IV

The place of burial is a large stone kopje so steep and rugged as to be almost inaccessible. The coffin was drawn up the heights by twelve oxen.

The hills were lined with wondering natives, standing like statues, and at first holding back, but finally the Indunas, Shembli, Faku and Umgula, came down, and over 2,000 natives were present at the last rite. All seemed greatly impressed, and the words, 'My father is dead,' were heard on all sides among them.

The procession finally reached the place of interment, and punctually at noon the Bishop of Mashonaland began the funeral service. The final scene was a most impressive one. About a thousand whites were congregated around the wind-swept hill, but the accommodation in the immediate vicinity of the grave was very limited.

The grave, which is cut three feet deep into the solid rock, is encircled by six boulders, and the whole space around it is only fifteen yards long.

A Union Jack lay on the coffin, which was lowered into the grave with chains, the wreath from the Queen and those from the deceased's brothers and Dr. Jameson being let down with it.

Many people were in tears, and the natives were full of emotion, every one feeling that a great chief had gone.

In the course of the service the Bishop, speaking

Note to Sonnet IV

in impressive tones, consecrated the grave in the following words:—

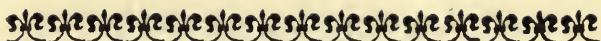
‘I consecrate this place for ever as his grave. Here he fought, here he lived and died for the Empire, fully alive to the great mystery of death.’

The Old Hundredth was afterwards sung by all present, and also the hymn, ‘Now the labourer’s task is o’er.’

Other portions of the service were chanted. At its conclusion the band again played the Dead March. At the end of all the people reverently passed round the grave in turn, quantities of flowers being thrown upon it. All the spectators wore black. The whole place around the grave was covered with wreaths. The proceedings passed off without a hitch of any kind.

To-night the natives will bury their chief, fifteen oxen to be slain as sacrifices, so that as far as they are concerned Mr. Rhodes, whom they mourn as their only chief, will have been buried with the same honours as Mosilikatze. Their mourning ceremonies will last all night.—*Daily Chronicle*, April 11, 1902.

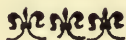




Sonnet VI

SECOMBI, a notable Matabele chief, together with his Indunas, or sub-chieftains, gave a royal salute to the body. This is a unique honour for a white man from the natives.

Secombi said: 'Now the body of our great chief Umzilikatze and that of the great white chief both rest in the Matoppos, and their spirits will meet in a great indaba (council) in the hereafter.'—*Daily Mail*, April 12, 1902.





Sonnet VII

IN the history of Matabeleland, so far as it has been ascertained, the Matoppos have played an important part. The pre-Matabele inhabitants of the country regarded this weird region as the abode of gods, and especially of the Ngwali or M'Limo, an invisible spirit who governed the seasons and the crops. His high priests, through whom he spoke to the people, dwelt in the caverns of the Matoppos. The Matabele inherited this belief from the Mlan Makalanga, but gradually transformed the god of peace and plenty into a god of war after their own heart, and the priests readily fell in with the change. The result was that when the insurrection broke out in 1896 it was from the Matoppos that the cry for war proceeded. There the dissatisfied Indunas took refuge, and thence the M'Limo sent forth his messages urging the murder of the whites. When, after the massacres, the British reinforcements under General Carrington arrived, and the insurgents in the plains were defeated, it was in the Matoppos again that the irreconcilable impis took refuge. To dislodge them was a task of enormous difficulty.

Note to Sonnet VII

A force of 1,000 men under Colonels Plumer and Baden-Powell marched through the fastnesses in all directions, but without decisive effect. Wherever they advanced they were assailed from the rocky recesses by unseen marksmen, who when pressed retired unopposed to similar positions on adjoining ridges, or fled into caverns which could be held against almost any number of troops. Nevertheless, the British persevered, and their insistence, far more than the losses they inflicted on the enemy, gradually broke down the insurgent resistance. The death of the high priest of M'Limo, who was pluckily tracked to his cave by Burnham, the American scout, and there shot dead, deprived the Matabele of their last hope. Still, however, they held out, and when the rainy season began General Carrington proposed to go into winter quarters and to await the arrival of reinforcements before resuming operations.

It was then that the Matoppos became the scene of one of the most impressive dramas of British Colonial history. General Carrington's plan would have proved ruinous to the Chartered Company, for the Matabele would have secured breathing space in which to pluck up their spirits and reorganize their resistance, and the bill that the company would have been called upon to pay would have completely crippled its resources. Mr. Rhodes thereupon determined to take the matter into his own hands. He conceived the bold plan of going unarmed and without

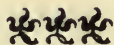


Note to Sonnet VII

an escort into the rebel stronghold, and endeavouring to arrange terms of peace. On the success of this gallant scheme depended a sum of £5,000,000, for this was what the crushing of the rebellion would have cost. Accompanied by Dr. Hans Sauer and Mr. J. Colenbrander, and carrying nothing more than a riding switch, Mr. Rhodes cantered boldly through boulders and thick brush to one of the fastnesses in the hills where he had heard an indaba was being held. Astounded by his hardihood, the natives allowed him to pass unmolested. Eventually he reached a small amphitheatre at the foot of sheer granite walls some two hundred feet in height, the crests of which were covered with armed rebels. Here the chief Indunas with a large number of young warriors were assembled. Dismounting unconcernedly from his horse, Mr. Rhodes advanced towards the chiefs and greeted them in native fashion. Mr. Colenbrander then called upon the rebels to tell their troubles to 'Rhodes, their father, who had come among them with peace in his heart'. Without hesitation the Indunas responded to the invitation, and volubly poured out their wrongs. Mr. Rhodes made no weak concessions, but promised a just redress of real grievances, and then demanded that the rebels should lay down their arms. This audacious stroke had its calculated effect. One of the leading Indunas seized a stick and held it above his head. This done, he threw it down at the feet of Mr. Rhodes, crying, 'See! this is my gun; I cast it

Note to Sonnet VII

at your feet.' The remainder of the Indunas sent up a cry of assent, and—the rebellion was over. As Mr. Rhodes rode home through the beetling crags of the Matoppos, he said to Dr. Sauer that the scene was 'one of those that make life worth living'.—*Daily Graphic*, April 10, 1902.



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